

HISTORY BOOKS & THE ARTS

Irving Kristol's New Conservatism Manifesto

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In the epilogue to this collection of thirty essays, "When Virtue Loses All Her Loveliness-Some Reflections on Capitalism and the 'Free Society,'" Irving Kristol, at one time or another an editor for *Commentary*, *Encounter*, *The Public Interest* and Basic Books, and now also Henry Luce Professor of Urban Values at New York University, draws a strikingly familiar image of a capitalism which at one and the same time destroyed the stable social order that preceded it, and produced a kind of human liberation in that act of destruction. The "bourgeois citizen" who emerged from that great act of liberation was in many respects the most creative, the most productive, and the freest citizen of all time. But alas, something went wrong; the bourgeoisie was unable to create a lasting moral-ity. Merit is no longer

conferred by hard work; capitalism has lost its early bourgeois virtue, become unlovely and unloved, and is in danger of losing its legitimacy. The men who organize the productive system we all benefit from are somehow unable to justify their position and activities in a believable manner.

But of course that image (repeated in several earlier essays) is familiar. We first encountered it, much more poetically, in *The Communist Manifesto*, in those famous passages in which Marx and Engels describe the glorious but ambiguous accomplishments of the bourgeoisie (“all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...”), and predict its loss of legitimacy and inevitable demise. At first we wonder why Kristol has bothered—especially as we notice that, in the Marxian context, his neoconservative denunciation of most recent attempts at liberal reform, scattered throughout this collection in various essays, seems equally unoriginal. After all, Socialists and other radical critics of capitalist society have claimed for more than a century that the piecemeal reform of capitalism is ultimately incompatible with the system’s effective functioning, so that a point of diminishing returns and thus crisis must necessarily be reached.

But Kristol is *not* merely repeating the conventional critical wisdom; far from it. On the contrary, like so many ex-Marxists turned conservative, he gives us a version of Marx that is like a reverse negative image, with every element of hope, every element of attachment to self-government and its possibilities, every thought of transcending capitalism’s limitations through the united action of people themselves, eliminated. The result is not only a most peculiar kind of

social analysis but also a major self-revelation that tells us everything we need to know about the real meaning of what has come to be called today's new conservatism.

In a short space, the only possible way to convey the flavor and significance of Kristol's thought (which is significant because he speaks in so many ways for the currently most prominent group of American intellectuals, who even have their own potential Presidential candidate in Senator Moynihan) is to consider at length a single essay which states his characteristic themes. The most revelatory of them all, perhaps, is one entitled "Utopianism, Ancient and Modern," which begins with the perceptive argument that earlier utopias were meant only as dreams, and as such added to the dignity of human longing. Modern utopias, however, are essentially insane expressions of a desire to realize an unrealizable dream on earth. It is in what he does with this initial contrast that we find all of Kristol's motifs coming together, and uncover the hidden face of his political philosophy.

Just how Kristol 'is going to distinguish his natural history of capitalism from Marx's first becomes apparent in the following passage:

... growth and decay are precisely what most offend the utopian cast of mind, for which time is an enemy to be subdued. And this is why the dimension of time is so rigorously excluded from modern city planning— and from modern architecture too, which derives from the same utopian tradition.

In this astonishing twist, the ideas of marginal intellectuals are "credited" with the destructive accomplishments of capitalism itself. History is stood on its head with a

vengeance. Reading this prose, with its seductive air of sagacity, one must pause to remember that not Fourier and Le Corbusier but a long line of oligarchs, speculators, and servants of corporate capitalism and the state, from Baron Haussman to Georges Pompidou, are the architects of modern Parisian order; that *La Defense* was put up by Pompidou's real estate cronies, not Daniel Cohn-Bendit; or, to look elsewhere, that Reston, Va. was created to make a corporate profit, not to fulfill a utopian dream. Does Kristol really not know that the planned obsolescence of modern city architecture derives from the imperative of profit and the special-interest nature of tax laws and building codes? It is difficult to believe that this cavalier attitude toward history is not deliberate; and it becomes more difficult as we continue.

... certain identifiable trends of thought (contributed to the emergence of the utopian mode of thought). These trends can be identified as millenarianism, rationalism, and what Professor Hayek calls "scientism." ...What makes modern millenarianism so powerful—one is tempted to say irresistible—is its association with modern scientific rationalism and modern technology. Scientific rationalism...came to mean—it is, indeed, the essential meaning of that period we call the Enlightenment—that existing institutions could be legitimized only by reason...

But again, it is not primarily Enlightenment intellectuals but rather the rise of the capital-ist, free-market spirit and the political liberalism associated with it that have produced legitimation through reason, and thus subverted traditional sentiments of loyalty, obligation, and human attachment. Obviously such a change in intellectual temper could not have taken place if the precarious religious unity of the

Middle Ages was not breaking down at the same time, but it was circumstances, not merely ideas, that destroyed that unity. Hobbes did not write the *Leviathan* because he was a rationalist contaminated by millenarianism but rather because he correctly perceived that the controlled pursuit of domestic economic betterment by individuals would be the surest way to produce social cohesion out of the chaos around him. Somewhat later his insight would be systematized by a rising capitalist bourgeoisie and its philosophers not because they were rationalists but because they were engaged willy-nilly in making a world which had to be rationalized. Later still Max Weber would sum up this whole development by pointing out that the spirit of legitimation through reason, the spirit of hierarchical bureaucracy, and the spirit of profit-pursuing capitalist enterprise, are one and the same. If “rationalism” produced a socially destructive cast of mind, it had some very powerful allies — virtuous capitalism being chief among them.

Kristol is well aware of this; that is why he has only two cheers for capitalism. But yet he can never refrain from attributing the responsibility for our allegedly declining moral condition to the enemies of capitalism, or at best persons marginal to it, rather than to capitalism itself: that is, to intellectuals rather than to entrepreneurs and rulers. In 1848 Marx, to be sure, had still to justify the accomplishments of nascent capitalism against both reactionary conservatives and reactionary utopians: but for what reason is Kristol being so protective of capitalism at this late date, and against whom, and on whose behalf? We are momentarily even more puzzled as we read on:

Modern conservatism found it necessary to argue what had always been previously assumed by all reasonable men; that institutions which have existed over a long period of time have a reason and a purpose inherent in them, a collective wisdom incarnate in them...

It's not even faintly possible to tell what Kristol hopes to accomplish with this hand-me-down version of Burke. Not capitalism but feudalism and Roman Catholicism hold the track record for sheer longevity in European civilization. If Kristol thinks there was a collective wisdom incarnate in them, why does he so laud the bourgeois parvenus who destroyed the power of both of those "institutions"? It begins to seem that "all reasonable men" are simply any handful of men who are able to justify the appropriation of power by a minority at one time or another. The German barons no doubt thought their power had a reason and a purpose to it, but the peasants who kept revolting against them did not — perhaps they were not reasonable. But of course it wasn't the peasants who finally destroyed the feudal version of community; it was capitalists and the aggrandizing central state. Modern conservatism, then, should be *anti-capitalist*; should defend, both retrospectively and immediately, the yeomen against the gentry, the Chartists and the Luddites and their descendants against the industrialists and corporate rationalizers, the people of Appalachia against strip miners, the family farm against corporate farming, and so on. But it does none of these things; instead it fronts for the economically powerful. Kristol will attack the rationalist character of rationalizing capitalism, but never its capitalist character; never the way it distributes power, which is to say, the way history is actually made.

Kristol defends his acquiescent pasture in the very first essay in this collection, by asserting that the working class in capitalist societies is never really anti-capitalist; only radical intellectuals are. We are to believe that the collective wisdom of the pro-capitalist people— who in that wisdom seem oddly to favor a most socially subversive and upstart “tradition”—is under siege from the utopian rationalism of discontented intellectuals. Is Kristol then giving two cheers for capitalism because he is a closet Populist? Well, no:

Most ordinary people, most of the time, intuitively feel the force of this conservative argument. But these same ordinary people are defenseless intellectually against the articulated and aggressive rationalism of our intellectual class—and this explains why, when modern men do rebel against the unreasonableness of modern rationalism, they are so likely to take refuge in some form of irrationalism. The 20th-century phenomenon of fascism is (such) an expression.

Fascism as a refuge is a conception that certainly tells us something about Kristol’s view of the class, “ordinary people”; quite apparently, it does not include the organized working classes of Italy and Germany, fascism’s initial victims. But it is the *contempt* for “ordinary people” expressed in the second quoted sentence above that really unmasks “conservatism”; the poor defenseless fools *would be* pro-capitalist most of the time *if only* they weren’t so easily victimized by intellectuals; their collective wisdom is apparently of a lesser order than Kristol’s intelligence. When people take a wrong turning it is because they are dupes, not because they are driven there by the activities of those ruling

groups against whose power many people *are* genuinely defenseless but whose power Kristol refuses ever to challenge seriously.

On the other hand, Kristol adds later on that “the tremendous expansion of government during these past three decades has not obviously made us a happier and more contented people,” yet “the response to this state of affairs among our educated classes is to demand still more governmental intervention,” whereas “the ordinary people (once again!), whose common world always anchors them more firmly in common sense, are skeptical of such a prescription...” When he wants to uphold his devil theory of radical intellectuals, the people are intellectually hapless, but when he wants to pose as a conservative Populist, their intellects are suddenly firmly resistant to nefarious influence. “The people” aren’t people, they’re just a malleable tool in his argument, an argument which always avoids coming to grips with social reality. One can’t, for example, tell who it is among “the educated classes” that bothers him so much, but on the evidence of his other essays it is his own left-wing students and colleagues: who, if they are anything like my left-wing students and colleagues, far from calling for more “governmental intervention” are calling for very unutopian forms of decentralization and democratization of government, for more genuinely public control of productive capital, for industrial democracy based in the individual work place, and for self-government based in the community. In other essays Kristol denounces the “New Left” for purveying an anti-capitalist and anti-liberal bias so pervasive that it’s destructive of all our institutions, including those of governance. Another self-contradiction: surely it can’t be the

same critics call-ing for those very same institutions to engage in more intervention? Is it not rather George Meany he has in mind?

But George Meany also is not just an elitist demanding full-employment policies be-cause Robert Owen's rationalist utopian schemes have been filtered down to him by irresponsible intellectuals. Almost everything capitalist governments do, even today, is *demanded* by some very large number of "ordinary people," often even numbering among them allegedly antigovernment conservatives (who want *more* money spent by government on defense, or the police, or control of television, or an aggressive assertion of overseas economic interests). The only visible difference among most people in capitalist societies is, still, not *whether* government should "intervene" but how, and more important, on whose behalf. Farmers, for example, may be "skeptical" about the usefulness to them of further advances in the welfare state, but everywhere in the capitalist world they remain extraordinarily credulous about the social virtue of crop price supports.

Moreover, it is not merely logrolling self-interest that has inflated and still inflates the role of the capitalist state, while at the same time undermining its legitimacy. Undoubtedly a majority of people in all the advanced capitalist nations taken together is right now "pro-capitalist" from the standpoint of a committed Marxist, or anarchist, etc., many of them for the very good reason that they perceive a bird in the hand, however lame, to be worth any number in the bush. But are all "ordinary people" attached by the force of real belief (as is Kristol) to the primary institutions of capitalism — the free market for pricing goods, the

commodity market in labor, the authoritarian structure of employment, the untrammelled right of corporate property to do what it wishes with itself, and political rule on behalf of corporate wealth? On the contrary, every one of those institutions has been under massive attack from “ordinary people” since the dawn of capitalism itself. Even while accepting capitalism, even sometimes while aggressively defending it in argument, even while scorning alternatives to it and having no intention of pursuing them, millions of people in all capitalist societies work effectively to undermine it, to resist its sway. It is precisely because they’ve succeeded so well that what Kristol correctly depicts as a crisis of capitalist legitimacy has arisen.

In order to accommodate that resistance, capitalist states have been forced to create reformist institutions and programs that are inconsistent with the productive working of capitalist economy: they have bloated the state, supported endemic inflation, and generated a picture of institutional and moral incoherence that becomes harder and harder to defend. Across Western Europe today, for example, the citadel of hierarchical corporate control of the work place comes more and more under direct attack from “ordinary people” (though it may be Kristol thinks factory workers are beneath even that pale); in their efforts to absorb that attack reformist governments promote policies that make capitalism look less and less like itself; the ferment of disillusionment spreads, even if it often lacks any political direction.

Kristol would have us believe that that ferment (and all anti-capitalist agitation) exists only because it was created by the Left. But *why* do the ideas of a (relatively) impecunious

intellectual class dominate (supposedly) the ideas of a business class which has billions of dollars to spend on their behalf; which controls most mass media, and which masks many of its operations in an expensive cloak of secrecy that prevents people from finding out what is actually going on in their lives? Kristol rejects the possibility that the Left's ideas are *better* ideas—he believes neither in the practicality nor the desirability of trying to recapture power from economic and political oligarchs. To the extent, therefore, that “ordinary people” are succumbing to the wrong ideas, he can only be claiming that intellectuals are better at palming off ideas on “defenseless” people than are businessmen and politicians. (Are the latter too “rational?” Really?)

Kristol is an intellectual himself, so what he is really saying is that when he thinks of himself he thinks of a man who can peddle snake oil to anyone with an I.Q. lower than his. It begins to appear that the main impetus of Two Cheers for Capitalism is nothing more than smugness; what he really wants to do is destroy the influence of those members of his own class who are giving it a bad name, so that people like himself can exercise that influence instead. Reasonable men are after all the best men:

For more than a century, bourgeois-liberal society did have one powerful inner check upon its utopian impulses, and that was the “dismal science” of economic theory ... The cornerstone of this theory was the Malthusian hypothesis ... This hypothesis was accepted by most thinking men of the 19th century...

Since Kristol apparently reads no one but “Professor Hayek,” it should occasion no surprise that he's never read E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* either.

There he would have discovered that there were many “thinking men” (it’s not clear whether he thinks women think) who *didn’t* accept the Malthusian hypothesis—but no, to be a “thinking man” you have to have been a house philosopher for the bourgeoisie, a rationalizer of privilege. For that matter, not only many Americans but Malthus himself did not think his hypothesis would apply here except in a distant future, and God knows what people in Holland or in Sweden thought about it in the 19th century—certainly Kristol doesn’t. “History” has by this paragraph become so hopelessly confused with the history of Kristol’s favorite ideas that a handful of English ideologues are now transmuted into the whole of “bourgeois-liberal” society everywhere. The last refuge of the class-conscious intellectual is indeed nothing more than a kind of social solipsism: the world consists of him with his, *real* ideas, and “ordinary people” with their *manipulated* ideas, incarnate wisdom— anything but the ability to think for themselves (one awaits his praise of their natural rhythm).

The ordinary people, in truth, now turn out to be quite inferior to Kristol himself, incarnate wisdom or no:

The transformation of the bourgeois citizen into the bourgeois consumer has dissolved that liberal-individualist framework which held the utopian impulses of modern society under control. One used to be encouraged to control one’s appetites; now one is encouraged to satisfy them without delay.

Here we see that Kristol’s continuous falsification of the historical past has a unifying theme: simply to legitimize domination. One “used to be encouraged” indeed! “One” was, as in England, “encouraged” at gunpoint, at bayonet point, in

workhouses and sanatoriums, and by the institution of prison and even capital punishment for such offenses as vagrancy, vagabondage and idleness. Bourgeois citizens probably made up less than 5 percent of the population of 18th-century England, and thus can hardly be the ancestor of today's bourgeois consumers there; as in most of Europe, the ancestor of today's bourgeois consumer was a peasant or worker who was "encouraged" to do almost nothing, but rather compelled to "thrift" by either circumstances or the brute force exercised by a ruling class. Even in America, Kristol's bourgeois citizen was always in a minority: and at all times here it has also been poverty, powerlessness, and oppressive force as well (as visited, for example, upon strikers) that have enforced the "control" of "appetite" for millions.

Apparently Kristol's only complaint about that domination is that it wasn't successful enough. The ordinary people once so beloved of Kristol are suddenly a ravening wolf battering at his door—why can't they learn to live within *their* means, just as he presumably lives within his? Kristol may have only two cheers for capitalism but, it turns out, that's more than he has for democracy.

The reason he opposes both reformist "governmental intervention" *and* radical prescriptions for self-government is that they're *both* too democratic for him. Ordinary people should stay in their place.

The modern world, and the crisis of modernity we are now experiencing, was created by ideas and by the passions which these ideas unleashed. To surmount this crisis, without destroying the modern world it-self, will require new ideas or new versions of old ideas — that will regulate these passions and bring them into a more fruitful and harmonious relation with reality.

It is, of course, a lot easier to regulate those “passions” on Kristol’s income than on the income of most ill-controlled ordinary people. But there is a side-benefit to this part of his argument. We now learn that the passion for equality which supposedly only manifests itself in radical intellectuals who are always trying to mislead ordinary people (a viewpoint Kristol expresses at length in another well-known essay from this collection, “About Equality”), is really much more widespread than Kristol is willing to admit when he’s denouncing his left-wing peers as “elitists.” What else is the passion for consumer affluence, the insistence on living like your economic betters under a pile of debt, but a sublimated or perverted form of a passion for a good deal more of equality of life chances than now exists in most capitalist societies? No, Kristol is no Populist; he’s defending the same privileges that conservatives always defend: theirs.

As for the “ideas” that will resuscitate our failing world, who are they to come from, and what are they to be? We know the answer to the first question already—they will come from intellectuals, from people like Kristol: and they will be imposed, somehow or other, on “ordinary people.” What is wickedly domineering when allegedly done by radical

intellectuals is but respectful of human dignity when done by conservative intellectuals who revere traditions, especially their own.

It would not be fair to ask Kristol what those ideas will look like, since that is not his task, but in the very last sentence of the essay he does give us one clue to the direction, or rather the implicit political tendency, of his thought:

Only such a reformation (of modern utopianism) can bring us back to that condition of sanity, to that confident acceptance of reality, which found expression in Lord Macaulay's tart rejoinder to Francis Bacon: "An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia."

At last: the mountain of neoconservative wisdom, of social science in *The Public Interest* brings forth this mouse of Victorian romanticism. Now, as it happens, Middlesex is the kind of crowded suburb in which many of what Kristol thinks of as the amenities of life are notably absent, and in which only airplanes have an acre to live on. Elsewhere in capitalist societies, the mortgage and tax burdens on individual small holdings mount under speculative pressures; and most available land (especially in the United States) is more and more owned by agribusiness, industry, the military and automobiles. Two hundred years too late, the preindustrial utopias of Rousseau and Blake, with their peasants meeting under oak trees and Jerusalems in the Midlands, are resurrected as "new ideas." But Kristol knows what he is doing. As long as capitalism, whether declining or somehow rejuvenated, remains in the saddle in industrial societies, then for most people leading a less privileged way of life than Kristol's, Macaulay's vision must remain the only

kind of utopia that Kristol admires: a dream. But meanwhile he, we can be sure, has his substantial “acre” securely tucked away somewhere.

On only one point, finally, is Kristol consistent: he is always class-conscious. The younger, radical Irving Kristol whom he has autobiographically described in a recent *New York Times Magazine* essay, would have scornfully recognized the Kristol of today as an “all-rightnik.” Kristol is still much too bright not to know an all-rightnik when he sees one, if only in the mirror, so he has conceived a subtle disguise: he will wear the mask of tragedy, mourning the time “when virtue loses all her loveliness.”

But the result is only flummery. Eulogies to unidentifiable “ordinary people” aside, it is impossible to detect any real concern for the fate of other human beings in these es-says, nor is any actual reason given why the decline of capitalism and the gradual creep of egalitarianism should not be considered a blessing rather than a curse. (In “About Equality” Kristol argues that the search for equality is against nature, since a true understanding is that we are naturally subjected to the “tyranny of the bell-shaped curve.” But that is uninformed nonsense, such as Kristol often dispenses in his essays: rewards could be distributed along a bell-shaped curve, and yet the difference from the most to the least be a tiny fraction of what it is now in industrial societies.) In the end his “tragic” vision seems to contain nothing larger than the fear that the passion of “ordinary people” to share in society’s rewards and powers to the same extent he does will be uncontrollable; and that men like himself and his friends and epigones at *Commentary* and *The Public Interest* and other such places— “experts” by their own

assessment, ideological publicists by anyone else's—will be brought down from their present positions of eminence after years devoted to “making it.” That is why his cultural critique of capitalism remains steadfastly unpolitical, why he remains uninterested in the real view from the contemporary Left, in workplace democracy, in the dispersion of economic power under democratic community control. That, we see, is what distinguishes Kristol's vision most of all from Marx's: not the world-weary cynicism he parades; not his nostalgia without a dialectic; not his picture of a world inevitably ruled by the ideas of a few rather than the productive actions of many; but rather his immersion in fancily outfitted, yet plain and simple self-interest.

As Marx himself constantly reminds us, the assertion of self-interest is always understandable, and rarely if ever to be condemned out of hand: people have to live the way they live. But to dress up the defense of a besieged class privilege with such an unmerited pretense of scholarship and moral concern as one finds in these essays, is neither lovely, nor virtuous. ●

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